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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted in 1979 to determine the organizational factors that influence the growth or decline of community college Research, Evaluation, and Planning units (REP's) and to assess the impact of Proposition 13 (California tax limitation measure, 1978) on these units. A historical analysis of REP development at a single community college district provided a source of hypotheses and variables which were investigated later in a statewide survey of California community colleges. The survey solicited information about the presence, structure, and activities of REP's at district offices of multi-campus districts, and at colleges in single- and multi-campus districts for 1977-78, 1978-79, and projected for 1979-80. Responses from 90% of the colleges revealed that: (1) REP units tended to develop at the district rather than the college level; (2) REP unit creation and survival were correlated with the chief administrator's degree of commitment to the unit; (3) REP units providing administrative support services were more likely to survive than those stressing instructional research support; (4) most REP units were viewed as non-essential and thus were particularly vulnerable in times of retrenchment; and (5) REP units were more likely to be funded if they provided information on topics of pressing organizational concern rather than information for external reporting requirements. (JP)

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SUMMARY OF FINDINGS:

STUDY OF INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH AND PLANNING UNIT DEVELOPMENT IN CALIFORNIA COMMUNITY COLLEGES

(Results of an exploratory organizational study carried out with the endorsement of the California Community and Junior College Association Research and Development Committee)

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SUMMARY OF FINDINGS: STUDY OF INSTITUTIONAL
RESEARCH AND PLANNING UNIT DEVELOPMENT
IN CALIFORNIA COMMUNITY COLLEGES

This paper summarizes findings from a study of institutional research and planning unit development in California community colleges and college districts, carried out in 1979 with the endorsement of the California Community and Junior College Association/R&D Committee. The study focused on detecting the growth or decline of such units over time. Special attention was paid to the influence of sudden change in community college financing due to California's tax limitation measure, Proposition 13, passed in June of 1978.

Study Focus and Design

Purpose. The purpose of the study was to explore the processes by which institutional research/planning units (referred to as "REPs" for Research-Evaluation-Planning unit) were developed in educational organizations.[1] Particular attention was paid to organizational variables associated with REP creation, maintenance (or elimination), and growth (or decline). The public community college and college district were taken as the focal organization, even though the concepts applied more generally to schools or senior institutions of higher education.

For purposes of this study, an "REP" included any position or interrelated set of positions (a) with primary responsibility for gathering and reporting systematic data about any aspect of institutional functioning, to aid decision makers; (b) formally assigned this responsibility as indicated by title, job description, or other visible designation by top leadership. The REP responsibility was often combined with other assignments, but where less than .33 of an FTE position was assigned the research and planning function, it was considered too difficult to treat as an identifiable subunit.

A range of positions within the community college administrative structure conformed to this definition : institutional research officers, deans of planning and development and their staffs, faculty members released full time to perform in-house research, and so on. On the other

[1] No distinction was drawn between "research," "planning," and "evaluation." All were treated as aspects of the same rational approach to management, based on systematic data.

hand, Deans of Instruction or other administrators with only a small portion of their role devoted to "research" were not treated as REPs.[2]

The Study in Relation to Existing Theory and Research. Little prior research has been done by scholars of educational administration relevant to the research problem. A series of "status surveys" concerning the institutional research function in higher education suggests a few correlates of the REP's presence in an organization. However, these studies lack a more solid conceptual base or developmental perspective, that is, aimed at capturing change in subunit structure over time. Organization theory provides a better foundation for the research problem, even though no single theoretical tradition deals directly with it. Four basic arguments concerning subunit formation (deriving from the work of Thompson, Lawrence and Lorsch, Pfeffer, and Aldrich) provide complementary explanations for the appearance of any subunit, as a response to a) internal coordinative needs, b) environmental pressures on the organization, c) internal political processes, and d) an ongoing diffusion process within the organizational population.

Work by other scholars (notably Clark, Weick, Benveniste, Dalton, Hannan, and Freeman) focus the general explanations on the specific characteristics of the REP: that of expert staff with responsibility for bringing institution-wide data and analysis to bear on decision-making. These perspectives suggest that the subunit's marginal status and ambiguous mission, combined with the special nature of public educational organizations in changing financial conditions, make the REP's position within the organization problematic. At the same time, theory points to important roles potentially played by organizational complexity, internal political alignments, and change in organizational resources in promoting the subunit, as well as the structure and behavior of the REP itself.

Methods and Data Sources. The theoretical themes were explored in two inter-related empirical settings: an historical case study of REP development in a single community college district over the past 25 years and a panel survey of the corresponding population of colleges during the last three years of the case study timeframe. The population consisted of all community colleges within a single large state (California). The survey's timepoints were set before and after California's Proposition 13, which provided an unusual "natural laboratory" for investigating change in marginal subunit structure, as it was especially vulnerable to sudden retrenchment conditions. Conducted at the start of the 1979-80 academic year, the survey gathered data with reference to three timepoints:

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[2] Other positions which handled institutional information, such as Data Processing Manager or Public Information Officer, lacked the analytic decision-orientation of the REP, and consequently fell outside the definition, unless formally assigned "research" or "planning" duties as well. A few types of positions, such as "research and development" officers were difficult to classify; where these were in effect grantsmen, they were not treated as REPs.

1977-78 Year 1978-79 Year 1979-80 (Projected)

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Proposition 13 Survey Administered

The research strategy was explicitly exploratory and descriptive. Guided by the ideas from organization theory, patterns were constructed in the case study through a review of documentary evidence and interviews with research/planning personnel and chief administrators during the 25-year period. The case provided a source of tentative hypotheses and promising variables for more structured investigation in the survey. Survey data were gathered by phone interview, mailed follow-up questionnaire, and archival sources from all colleges and college districts within the population. The survey instrument combined open-ended items with more structured ones, and was designed to elicit information across the three timepoints of the survey, about the presence and structure of an REP, its activities and related organizational conditions. All college and district chief administrators were surveyed, as were staff in charge of research and planning, where such personnel existed.

Response rates to the survey were exceptionally high (overall, approximately 90%). Using exploratory analytic techniques, patterns of REP creation, maintenance (elimination), and growth (decline) were constructed from the combined data sets of case study and survey. Analyses were done separately for three organizationally distinct groups of the population district offices in multi-college districts, colleges in multi-college districts, and single-college districts.

Study Findings

REPs were distributed differently among the subgroups of the population and across the three timepoints, as the following chart shows:

NUMBER OF ORGANIZATIONS WITH REPs AT EACH TIMEPOINT

	77-78 Year	78-79 Year	79-80 Year (Proj.)
District offices in multi-college districts (n=19)[a]	9 (47%)[b]	11 (58%)[b]	11 (58%)[b]
Colleges in multi-college districts (n=56)[a]	21 (38%)	18 (32%)	23 (41%)
Colleges in single-college districts (n=51)[a]	15 (29%)	10 (20%)	13 (23%)

[a] Total number of organizations in each category.

[b] Number and percent of organizations in each category with REP.

The overall pattern is one of relative stability; in most colleges or district offices, changes in the presence or absence of an REP did not occur. However, consistent themes regarding subunit change did emerge from instances in which REPs were created or eliminated, and from cases in which existing REPs gained or lost funding relative to their host organizations.[3] These themes are summarized below.

(1) REPs tended to develop at the center of more complex organizational systems. Prior to Prop. 13, REPs were more likely to be found at district office level (in multi-college districts) than at college level. Especially under the threat of reduced financing for college districts, REPs were more likely to be created or to grow within the district offices of multi-college districts, while at the same time the subunits were losing funds or being eliminated within individual colleges. (Under less stringent conditions the following year college-level REPs increased accordingly.) Among district offices, those in districts with three or more colleges tended to have or create REPs more than was the case in the less complex two-college districts. Significantly, reduction in overall district funds did not necessarily mean proportional cuts in district office resources or district-level REPs.

In part, the patterns can be attributed to organizational size: the larger the college or district, the more likely to maintain or create an REP. But evidence pointed to other factors as well: a) Both large size and organizational complexity made it more difficult for top leadership to "know what was going on" in their colleges or districts. For many leaders an REP helped accomplish this. b) The external financial threat accelerated a centralizing process in many multi-college districts, and possibly within single colleges. REPs seemed to play a role, either symbolic or actual or both, in the centralization of control. c) In a number of districts and colleges, especially the more politicized urban districts, public scrutiny of college programs increased. REPs were used in many cases as a way of responding to public attack, and to the increasing external demands for information about the district or college.

(2) REPs were created and survived in proportion to the chief administrator's short-term "political" needs and commitment to the unit. The fate of an REP fell within the chief administrator's discretionary power for the most part. Not surprisingly, most REPs were closely linked to CAs; half had direct reporting relationships and most communicated regularly with their respective top administrators. The more closely linked to CAs in both a research/planning and "general staff assistance" role, the more likely were REPs to be created or maintained. This close

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[3] Many colleges initially without REPs faced major constraints on the creation of REPs. In addition to board-imposed hiring freezes immediately following Prop. 13, small organizational-size, district-level policies, or the CA's policy regarding research planning funding, made REP creation virtually impossible.

link between the unit and top leadership happened more often where the CA was strongly committed to research/planning functions and to their placement in a district position (approximately 20% of all CAs opposed on principle creating such positions).

In part, the commitment of CAs to REPs was a matter of personal conviction. But behind this conviction lay aspects of the internal "politics" of the college or district. In most cases, these internal political pressures on the CA appeared to intensify under the financial cutback threat. CAs frequently turned to REPs for help in this situation. Three patterns were especially noticeable: a) REPs were often used as a way or sorting among competing interests, by using systematic data as a yardstick. b) Recently appointed CAs were more likely to maintain an existing REP or create one than CAs with established constituencies within their college or district. REPs functioned as a way of familiarizing CAs with the new organization, buying time, de-politicizing these situations, and helping establish the newcomer's control over events (or at least, the appearance of control). c) Where collective bargaining pressures were perceived by the CA to be more severe, existing REPs seemed more likely to survive, apparently as one means to assist top leadership to cope with these pressures. In a few such cases, new REPs were created. But the pattern was reversed in colleges hardest hit by funding cutbacks; there, the faculty call in collective bargaining for reduced administrative expenses was associated with REP elimination.

(3) REPs serving top administrators in an "administrative support services" capacity were more likely to survive than those with close links to faculty and an "instructional resource" identity. Under conditions of financial threat, administrators and faculty related to each other increasingly as adversaries in many colleges and districts. REPs which were allied closely with the faculty and performed research relating primarily to instruction seemed least likely to survive and/or to maintain their hold on their budgets (a few REPs heavily involved in grants-raising and successful at it were exceptions to this pattern). On the other hand, REPs closely tied to established administrative support services such as data processing or registration appeared to weather cutback pressures more successfully. Few REPs had close regular communication both with faculty and top administrators.

Several factors previously mentioned contributed to this overall pattern: a) The development of REPs at the center of more complex organizations, part of the centralizing response to external threat, meant that the subunits were further removed from the instructional level. b) Where college resources dropped most, faculty tended to push hard for the elimination of the REP, which was seen as a nonessential administrative expense. c) REPs with an established and non-threatening administrative home base were less likely to become targets for faculty resistance. But to the extent that the REP generated information to support cutback decisions, it was more actively opposed by faculty groups.

(4) REPs varied considerably in terms of their vulnerability to cutback pressures, but all faced limits on their ability to escape marginal status. REPs were generally viewed as "non-essential" to their organizations and were threatened, to a greater or lesser degree, by the prospect of cutbacks in college or district funds. Larger REPs, headed by higher status individuals (e.g., certificated administrators) with more expert staff and mandates, were more able to resist cutback pressures. REPs with a broader constituency, as represented by number of committee assignments, were also less vulnerable. In most cases, successful REPs appeared to have developed a less marginal niche for themselves by gradual stages.

But there were limits to the REPs movement away from a vulnerable marginal position in the college or district. The career horizon of REP personnel and their influence in decision-making circles was often restricted, so long as they remained in research and planning roles. A few claimed to belong to the organization's inner circle of administrators; many complained about being excluded. This frustration seemed to contribute to their leaving REP positions. The opposite kind of process pertained where REP personnel were too effective in building political alliances within the college, or became too good at performing an established administrative service: such people were often promoted into higher administrative positions and their research and planning functions were left by the wayside.

(5) REPs which collected certain kinds of information seemed more likely to survive. There was a widespread feeling among respondents that retrenchment conditions made institutional data more valuable to top administrators. REPs which gathered and reported information on certain topics of pressing concern to the organization (e.g., fiscal studies of various kinds) appeared more likely to survive, and even to gain funding relative to other departments. But where REPs tried to gather data across a wide range of administrative concerns or were most heavily involved in external reporting, there was little evidence of gains in funding--many of these REPs were less successful in maintaining their hold on organizational funding.

Systematic information generated by REPs became valuable not only because it contributed to the solution of particular problems. As implied by earlier findings in this summary, the information was valuable in at least these other ways: a) Systematic information about the performance of parts of the more complex systems helped top leadership get in touch with what the parts were doing. b) Systematic information contributed to a centralizing of control by providing top leaders with one basis for decisions regarding department's future and by signalling the intention to make such decisions. c) Research and planning information was also one way for top leadership to cope with competing interests and adversarial conditions within their college or district. d) Institutional data was also a way of handling the outside world, especially for meeting public challenges.

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